



MIDDLESEX

by Jeffrey Eugenides

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About Jeffrey Eugenides

Jeffrey Eugenides decided to be a writer at the age of 14. The son of an American-born father, of Greek parents, and an Anglo-Irish mother, Eugenides grew up in suburban Detroit. After attending Brown University and gaining a place in the prestigious writing program at Stanford University, his first novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, was published to critical acclaim in 1993 when Eugenides was 33 and he was named as one of America's best young novelists. *Middlesex*, his second novel, was published almost a decade later. He now lives in Berlin with his wife and daughter.

On writing *Middlesex*—Jeffrey Eugenides

I think we are all fascinated by a character that is able to live both genders and know the world from the other side. The circumstance that led me directly to the subject was reading *The Memoirs of a 19th Century Hermaphrodite*, the diary of Alexina Barbin, which Michel Foucault translated in the 1970s. It was unsatisfying in terms of narrative and the information that she was able to reveal about her life. I read it in my early 20s and thought that someday I would like to fill in the gaps.

In the history of literature the hermaphrodite often has a fanciful or mythical component, from the blind prophet Tiresias to Virginia Woolf's Orlando. I wanted to write a story that was medically and scientifically accurate. I started reading sexology and biology books and finding out the different possibilities. The condition that I use in the novel, 5-alpha-reductase deficiency syndrome, appealed to me because it was the most dramatic metamorphosis. You are born looking like a girl, and then you virilise and become quite male. This syndrome comes from inbreeding and intermarriage, so I began thinking about the genetics of it, and that brought me into writing a family story. Then I realised I was going to tell the story of an entire family and the migration of this gene.

It's a personal stretch for me to assume this character's point of view, so that's why I used so much of my own family's history, to help me believe in the voice. My grandparents did emigrate from Asia Minor like Callie's grandparents in the novel, and they came to the US, to Detroit. I used a lot of street names and addresses from my family's history. I was writing about the 1970s in book three when I realised the title for the book was staring me in the face because I grew up on Middlesex Boulevard, Grosse Pointe. The book had been destined to be named this.

It was problematic finding the voice for Callie. In the early stages I was preoccupied with ‘She was a girl, so this has to read like a woman’s point of view’. And then I would think ‘Well, what is a woman’s point of view?’. Then I thought, ‘He’s writing it as an adult when he’s living as a male and is fairly male in his physical characteristics’, but I had to take into account that he grew up as a girl. In the end I realised what I believed most strongly was that each individual has his or her own consciousness that didn’t have to stand for anyone else’s. I just had to accept that the way he saw the world was the way he saw it.

The problem I had as a novelist is that it seems almost part of the job to speak for other people unless you want to write extremely personal stories. I knew I was treading on other people’s territory, yet I thought many of the people in the intersex movement would be pleased with the issues the novel was bringing out.

The Bookseller, July 2002

Reviews

Sydney Morning Herald—James Ley
Genetic twist in the American dream

Jeffrey Eugenides’s first novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, created much of its wonderfully surreal atmosphere by the simple but effective strategy of taking teen angst seriously, treating it with a level of respect that only a depressed teenager would consider appropriate ... *Middlesex* is a more expansive and less heavily stylised work, but it, too, has at its heart a distinctive portrait of adolescence. The rite of passage of the narrator, Cal Stephanides, is the most intimate and convincing piece of characterisation in a novel that is full of memorable characters, but what makes it truly extraordinary is the fact that Cal has more reason than most to feel awkward and inbetween. For Cal is a hermaphrodite who, for the first 14 years of his life, is raised as a girl.

But the novel’s effortlessly buoyant narrative casts its net far wider than Cal’s unusual personal difficulties. *Middlesex* is the story of the entire Stephanides family, spanning 80 years and three generations. It traces the history of the single, mutated chromosome that, thanks to some discreet inbreeding, eventually manifests itself as Cal’s ambiguous genitalia; but in common with many recent American novels of ambition it also runs its characters past some large-scale social and historical upheavals. Around the central fact of Cal’s genetics, Eugenides builds a narrative flexible enough to take in broader questions of race and sex (or rather ethnicity and gender), while maintaining its focus on what is essentially an affectionate and immensely appealing family portrait.

The novel does affect a degree of self-consciousness at times. There are numerous literary allusions scattered throughout. Calliope—Cal's female incarnation—shares her name with the muse of epic poetry. And Cal, half-seriously referring to his birthright, variously likens himself to Tiresias, the Minotaur, Homer and the Delphic Oracle ...

There is an element of literary in-joke to this. But there is a more serious concern in the constant references to the literature of ancient Greece. It is Eugenides's wry conceit to link Cal's genetically induced deformity to the concept of fate, and this creates the central thematic tension of the book. Running counter to the idea of biological determinism is the immigrant experience itself. The three generations of the Greek-American Stephanides family follow a path that is part of the national mythology of the United States.

Cal's grandparents emigrate in hope of a better life; their children adapt and prosper; the third generation grows up as assimilated Americans. Cal, who only has to peek into his underpants to be reminded of the shaping influence of genetics, is nevertheless too American to allow himself to be a fly to wanton schoolboys, too American to accept a tragic fate.

Middlesex is an impressive, promise-fulfilling work, one that has earned comparisons with Jonathan Franzen's blockbuster, *The Corrections*. These are, however, somewhat misplaced. *Middlesex* does not have the satirical aims of Franzen's book. The two novels share an ambition to be both important and entertaining, but that's about it. Eugenides is an original and talented writer who does not need to be compared with anyone. And *Middlesex* is a great read.

***Australian Financial Review*—Peter Craven** **A mythical life in an actual world**

Eugenides is one of nature's writers. He composes prose which purrs and purls. He knows everything about the history of literature and he wears the knowledge lightly. He can invoke muses of epic poetry or the staircase structure of a Shandyeian prose and make the reader feel his mind is being caressed, not instructed. And he has the heavyweight gifts—a superb ear for dialogue, an ability to write sentences that sing tunes and a natural capacity to use metaphor that will illuminate rather than cloy.

He also shows in *Middlesex* ... an ability to use large-scale structures and to turn out narrative set pieces that would sit nicely in the most traditional kinds of novels. There is a brilliantly lit, majestically paced account of the Turkish rape of Smyrna and there are long rolling descriptions of the city of Detroit (where much of the action is set) which seem designed to carve that city, its atmosphere and its history, on the tombstone of the memory of the world.

So *Middlesex* is an unexpectedly grand, readable novel, full of incident and hilarity and feeling, with a saga-like quality and a great cast of characters. It's juicy, beautifully written and with a discernible tilt towards the popular; all of which makes it a book all sorts of readers will rollick through this Christmas, though that also points to some of its limitations.

... *Middlesex* is not just a book about sexual freakishness but, a bit disconcertingly, a Greek-American epic. Desdemona, the narrator's grandmother, and her brother Lefty flee Smyrna as the Turks are setting it alight. The trouble (or rather the central event in terms of the abracadabra of what ensues) is that they not only get it together sexually but they present themselves, on their arrival in America, as husband and wife, a primal scene and primal curse that the narrator lets us in on early in the piece, though none of the characters knows until the final pages.

It's a neatly comic treatment of an archetypal Greek and tragic situation and Eugenides gets a lot of moody fun out of elaborating the curse in genetic terms and then presenting the upshot as both funny and sad, like one of Shakespeare's last plays which transcend genre.

But this is a family saga and it allows for bootlegging, black Muslim evangelists and Desdemona's devotion to the cultivation of silkworms. And at the same time, it is a family romance, replete with a stubborn Republican Dad, Milton, and his quiet, considerate wife Tessie, both executed brilliantly in Woody Allen mode.

... *Middlesex* really kicks on when the narrator's early adolescence becomes the centre of the book. There is a strange, nearly eerie effect when we suddenly see the main character not as the incarnation of the masculine narrating voice, but as the young girl she and the world believe she is.

Nothing in this rich, engrossing book is more fine than the sections in the middle when Callie finds herself in love with her red-haired schoolmate, a girl who is known only as The Object ... The vision is a deep empathic sense of the earthiness and succulence of the young girl in flower and the fact that it's translated here from the perspective of an adolescent who is sexually weird only adds a terrible poignancy and an unassuageable Sappho-like sensuousness to the depiction. All of this long middle section of the novel is beyond praise, utterly strange and palpable. It is as good as American fiction has been in the longest time.

After this we have the drama of Calliope's ordeal with a famous gender specialist and the subsequent metamorphosis when the narrator comes to accept he is a boy and hits the road in order to avoid having his essential self mutilated.

This later on the road section is very traditional but it cannot compete with the world of longing and girls' underpants and brothers dressed as vampires and smelling your girlfriend's breath to see if it's bad. At this (which seems to be his God-given subject), Eugenides is matchless.

Elsewhere, make no mistake, he can be very good indeed; it's just that sometimes you get the odd sense of a prodigious talent lassoing itself in dizzying circles around the author's natural genius. That remains true, I think, of the novel's penultimate big event, a car chase involving Cal's father which is intrinsically improbable, though brilliantly executed. It is almost a leaf out of magical realism though you can hardly complain when the technique is as magnificent as this. On the other hand, the final scene with grandma Desdemona is wonderfully affecting and perfectly pitched. And over and over in this ramshackle, nearly middle-brow novel, Eugenides skips over a lake of sentimentalism or sludge like a man walking on water.

Middlesex is about as good as you could expect any novel bursting with family life and family fatalisms to be, it is better indeed than almost all fiction with such a palpable lien on the reader and with such a consummate grasp of the popular. It is a great multicultural novel (though it is both Greek and American to its backbone) and I suppose it is the most sustained attempt to create an anatomy of queer sexuality ever written. Is it a great novel? No, I don't think so, but it is a novel so full of sap and sexiness, it has so much poignancy and life, that this is less of a disappointment than it might be. It is certainly a testament to one of the most prodigious talents at work in fiction today.

***Bulletin with Newsweek*—Cameron Woodhead** **A breed apart**

... *Middlesex* is a multicultural family saga that resuscitates the literary hermaphrodite by sticking to the biological and medical facts ... The historical canvas on which Eugenides' novel is drawn is epic in scope, though it embodies opposite spectra—being at least as Sternean as it is Homeric—of what 'epic' might mean ... Overall, *Middlesex* is more rough-hewn than the author's first novel. But it's so much grander in ambition, so well-paced and so effortlessly dramatic, it doesn't suffer for that. Somehow, Eugenides has constructed an enormously entertaining epic on the quicksand of contemporary sexual identity. It's a miracle. We can only hope we don't have to wait a whole decade for his next book to come along.

Literary Review, UK—Sam Leith Another shandy?

Middlesex is a rare and curious literary artefact. I can only think of one other book in which a first-person narrator describes, as if an eyewitness, the action that takes place before his or her birth. In *Tristram Shandy*, we're four chapters in before Tristram is born, and subsequently, unmanned by an unmentionable accident involving a sash window. Calliope Stephanides, the narrator of *Middlesex*, is not born until nearly halfway through her story, although sexual confusion comes to her without the need for a sash window. The parallel holds. In character, *Middlesex* belongs more to the eighteenth century than the twenty-first; it is a marvellous, quirky and moving entertainment, with the narrative energy of Defoe and the gamesomeness of Sterne.

... A jacket quote from Jonathan Franzen identifies generosity as the prime virtue of *Middlesex*, and I think he is right. Callie's hermaphroditism, she says, gives her a means of all but reading the thoughts of men and women alike. It gives her, it is hinted, her narrator's clairvoyance; and it gives her an encompassing breadth of sympathy she shares with her author.

Middlesex is a great, sprawling, digressive, untidy, overwritten, teeming monster of a book—and, like its hero(ine) and narrator, the more lovable for its imperfections. It abundantly exemplifies the virtues that Sterne described hundreds of years before:

True *Shandeism*, think what you will against it, opens the heart and lungs, and like all those affectations which partake of its nature, it forces the blood and other vital fluids of the body to run freely through its channels, and makes the wheel of life run long and cheerfully round.

In an age of pinched postmodernism, the expansive premodernism of Jeffrey Eugenides' new book should be welcomed with great cheers and libations of black wine.

Time Out London—John O'Connell Genital giant

... *Middlesex* ... is a dynamic, baroque fable of transformation, a 'roller-coaster ride of a single gene through time' that whisks us from contemporary Berlin back to 1920s Asia Minor and the illicit union of Lefty and Desdemona Stephanides—brother and sister as well as husband and wife. When Smyrna is torched by the Turks, the pair escape on a ship to the US, settling amid other displaced Greeks in smoggy Detroit with their sworn-to-secrecy cousin, Sourmelina.

Their kids turn out okay. But their son's child, Calliope, our narrator, inherits a recessive mutation on the fifth chromosome. The result is 5-alpha-reductase deficiency syndrome: in layman's terms, hermaphroditism. Not that anyone notices. Callie is brought up (happily) as a girl, and only becomes conscious that something might be amiss when puberty hits and she fails to grow breasts or menstruate . . . In Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, a novel *Middlesex* resembles in scope and ambition, Saleem's body mirrors the disintegration of India. Eugenides is adamant that Callie 'does not represent America or Greek-Americans', all the same, she bears a hefty symbolic load, her liminal state the perfect catalyst for discussion of the immigrant experience, nature versus nurture, fate versus self-determination and, obviously, gender politics. The title, *Middlesex*, refers to Callie, for sure, but it's also the name of the Lloyd Wright-style house, 'geometric and grid-like', that her fast-food entrepreneur father buys in Grosse Pointe to escape the riots in downtown Detroit—a blank-canvas, starting-over house, though one whose purity of design counts for nothing once the Stephanides move in and fill it with their antique colonial furniture.

And that, you sense, is Eugenides' point: that purity—whether of gender, race or sexuality—is a state to which only lunatics aspire; that we are all adulterated, mongrel, from more or less dirty gene pools. (In case this sounds soporily PC, some of *Middlesex's* most trenchant satire is at the expense of the Nation of Islam, whom Callie's mother unwittingly goes to work for in one of the novel's funniest chapters.)

Eugenides says it was always his ambition to follow *The Virgin Suicides* with a bigger, baggier book, 'but there were times when it wasn't going well when I thought I'd make it smaller. The biggest difficulty was in getting the voice right. It had to be elastic enough to narrate epic events in the third person but also intimate enough to tell Callie's story in the first person. It had to have masculine and feminine qualities. Just figuring out the plotting, too, was hard as each chapter is so heavily plotted.'

Certainly, you can see where the nine years Eugenides spent writing *Middlesex* went. His grasp of socio-historical detail is faultless, particularly in the early chapters set in Asia Minor. At one point, describing Smyrna, Callie is moved to invoke one of its most famous literary sons, 'Mr Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant' from TS Eliot's *The Waste Land*, as a symbol of the city's one-time prosperity . . .

Middlesex has epic sweep, but its mode is archly comic in a way that points backwards to early Philip Roth and Saul Bellow as well as to contemporaries David Foster-Wallace, Jonathan Franzen and our own Zadie Smith. That said, some of the gags may work less well on this side of the Atlantic. Callie's hapless brother is referred to throughout the novel as 'Chapter Eleven', a joke

which really only works when you know that in the US the term refers to bankruptcy—and that Chapter Eleven ends up taking over the family business.

What really sets *Middlesex* apart is its warmth and generosity, its pervading air of historical optimism and inclusive, allusive cleverness. ‘Sing, Muse, of Greek ladies and their battle against unsightly hair!’ Callie exclaims during one of her frequent Homeric flights. Sing indeed: novels as good as this aren’t published very often.

***The New York Times Book Review*—Laura Miller
My big fat Greek gender identity crisis**

... Eugenides pitches a big tent, but one of the delights of *Middlesex* is how soundly it is constructed, with motifs and characters weaving through the novel’s various episodes, pulling it tight ... and while some of the odds and ends Eugenides tosses into the mix (a disquisition on Michael Dukakis, a supporting character’s bizarre connection to the Nation of Islam) don’t quite integrate, far more often than not the novel feels rich with treats, including some handsome writing ... Because it’s long and wide and full of stuff, *Middlesex* will be associated by some readers with books by David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Franzen, brilliant members of Eugenides’s cohort. Those writers, however, have more satirical, even self-lacerating inclinations; there can be an air of penance to their work (as there is to *The Virgin Suicides*). Here, at least, Eugenides is sunnier; the book’s length feels like its author’s arms stretching farther and farther to encompass more people, more life. His narrator is a soul who inhabits a liminal realm, a creature able to bridge the divisions that plague humanity, endowed with ‘the ability to communicate between genders, to see not with the monovision of one sex but in the stereoscope of both.’ That utopian reach makes *Middlesex* deliriously American; the novel’s patron saint is Walt Whitman, and it has some of the shagginess of that poet’s verse to go along with the exuberance. But mostly it is a colossal act of curiosity, of imagination and of love.

***Daily Telegraph UK*—Kathryn Hughes
Aphrodite’s offspring**

... In this brilliant sprawl of a book, Jeffrey Eugenides is interested in far more than the titillating detail of whether Cal’s ‘crocus’ is actually a penis or a clitoris and whether he will ever actually manage a sexual relationship with an adult woman ... Instead, Eugenides unravels Cal’s biological, social and cultural inheritance like a ball of wool, or perhaps like the threads made by his grandmother’s carefully cultivated silkworms, until he gets as near as he can to the fiction of a beginning. Not for nothing does Cal’s father share his name with Milton, the poet of Creation.

Eugenides never gets to point zero, the place from which all stories start, but he has an awful lot of fun along the way. He takes us back to Cal's grandparents settled at the foot of Mount Olympus who, in the scramble to flee their country's unhappy history, forget to mention to anyone at Ellis Island that they happen to be brother and sister as well as husband and wife. Not only does this inter-breeding result in Calliope's recessive fifth gene, it also beautifully illustrates Eugenides's central conceit that everything—and everyone—is on the point of turning into something else. Greeks become Americans, whites become black, boys become girls, girls become women and worms become pupae. If there is a sacred text standing behind *Middlesex* it is not so much *The Odyssey* as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

It is doubly apt, then, that anyone reading *Middlesex* cannot fail to spot its generic likeness, its first cousinhood, to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Here is that same epic sweep, that same colonizing of ancient storytelling traditions, that same obsession with the way that history gets written on the body. Eugenides shares with Rushdie an optimistic determination to cram in the story of pretty much everything since time began and show how it all rests heavily on the shoulders of one slight and reluctant individual. This might have resulted in a clumsy pastiche or a confused mess. But Eugenides combines a rigorous understanding of his sources (which include everything from Sophocles to Jeanette Winterson) with a wry and sprightly voice that is entirely original. The result is a masterful dissection and reassembling of the American Dream into a shape you will not quite have seen anywhere before.

Some suggested points for discussion

- ◆ Describing his own conception, Cal writes: 'The timing of the thing had to be just so in order for me to become the person I am. Delay the act by an hour and you change the gene selection' (p. 11). Is Cal's condition a result of chance or of fate? Which of these forces governs the world as Cal sees it?
- ◆ *Middlesex* begins just before Cal's birth in 1960, then moves backward in time to 1922. Cal is born at the beginning of Part 3, about halfway through the novel. Why did the author choose to structure the story in this way? How does this movement backward and forward in time reflect the larger themes of the work?

- ◆ When Tessie and Milton decide to try to influence the sex of their baby, Desdemona disapproves. ‘God decides what baby is,’ she says. ‘Not you’ (p. 13). What happens when characters in the novel challenge fate?
- ◆ ‘To be honest, the amusement grounds should be closed at this hour, but, for my own purposes, tonight Electric Park is open all night, and the fog suddenly lifts, all so that my grandfather can look out the window and see a roller coaster streaking down the track. A moment of cheap symbolism only, and then I have to bow to the strict rules of realism, which is to say: they can’t see a thing’ (pp. 110–11). Occasionally, Cal interrupts his own narrative, calling attention to himself and the artifice inherent in his story. What purpose do these interruptions serve? Is Cal a reliable narrator?
- ◆ ‘I’ve never had the right words to describe my life, and now that I’ve entered my story, I need them more than ever,’ Cal writes (p. 217). How does Cal narrate the events that take place before his birth? Does his perspective as a narrator change when he is recounting events that take place after he is born?
- ◆ ‘All I know is this: despite my androgenised brain, there’s an innate feminine circularity in the story I have to tell’ (p. 20). What does Cal mean by this? Is his manner of telling his story connected to the question of his gender? How?
- ◆ How are Cal’s early sexual experiences similar to those of any adolescent? How are they different? Are the differences more significant than the similarities?
- ◆ How does Cal’s experience reflect on the ‘nature vs. nurture’ debate about gender identity?
- ◆ Calliope is the name of the classical Greek muse of eloquence and epic poetry. What elements of Greek mythology figure in Cal’s story? Is this novel meant to be a new ‘myth’?
- ◆ How is Cal’s experience living within two genders similar to the immigrant experience of living within two cultures? How is it different?
- ◆ *Middlesex* is set against the backdrop of several historical events: the war between Greece and Turkey, the rise of the Nation of Islam, World War II, and the Detroit riots. How does history shape the lives of the characters in the novel?

- ◆ What does America represent for Desdemona? For Milton? For Cal? To what extent do you think these characters' different visions of America correspond to their status as first-, second-, and third-generation Greek Americans?
- ◆ 'Everything about Middlesex spoke of forgetting and everything about Desdemona made plain the inescapability of remembering,' Cal writes (p. 273). How and when do Desdemona's Old World values conflict with the ethos of America and, specifically, of Middlesex?
- ◆ The final sentence of the novel reads: 'I lost track after a while, happy to be home, weeping for my father, and thinking about what was next' (p. 529). What is next for Cal? Does the author give us reason to believe that Cal's relationship with Julie will be successful?
- ◆ 'Watching from the cab, Milton came face-to-face with the essence of tragedy, which is something determined before you're born, something you can't escape or do anything about, no matter how hard you try' (p. 426). According to this definition, is Cal's story a tragedy?

Further Reading

The Little Friend by Donna Tartt

The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini

The Corrections by Jonathan Franzen

Keepers of Truth by Michael Collins

The Virgin Suicides by Jeffrey Eugenides

The Death of Vishnu by Suri Manil

Infinite Jest by David Foster Wallace

Fierce People by Dirk Wittenborn

Midnight's Children by Salman Rushdie

I, The Divine by Rabih Alameddine

A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius by Dave Eggers